



Kevin McMenamin  
and Raymond Palmer.  
Photos: Clive Wasson

# Weather-proofing your fodder supply

All the data suggests that weather patterns are changing, with wetter and longer winters forecast. The severe conditions last spring led to a severe fodder shortage in some parts of the country, but lessons can be learned from farmers in the northern and western counties who are accustomed to laying in sufficient fodder for longer winter housing periods.



**Aidan Murray,**  
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**I**t's peculiar to be talking about securing feed stocks for next winter when summer hasn't even started. But it's a peculiar year. The poor weather which extended far into the spring has seriously depleted feed reserves on farms. Well stocked farms, naturally were the most seriously affected. Normal turnout dates were turned on their heads.

Below average spring growth left grass tight on lots of farms and opportunities to take out surplus grass have been few. Some farmers say that they only have a third of their normal quota of surplus bales made.

First-cut silage reports point to quite a variation in yield across farms depending on whether or not ground got slurry before closing. Although more so on dairy farms, there are even reports of silage being fed back to stock in June to offset the poor grass growth. All of this means further pressure on fodder reserves for next winter.

All the data is suggesting that weather patterns are changing and that ultimately our winters may be wetter and summers hotter. Translate this into implications for farming and we may see different animal diseases emerge, more problems with pests, and more fodder needed to carry us over prolonged winter housing or summer droughts. The experience of the last 12

months suggests that something will need to change.

The biggest problems with feed supplies in the spring were mainly in the southern half of the country where stocking rates are higher and winters generally tend to be shorter. Paying exorbitant prices for silage every spring because you have a forage deficit is not sustainable.

Many of the northern and western counties were less severely impacted by the volatile spring weather. This is partly because they are not carrying the same level of stock, but also they are much more accustomed to planning for a longer winter housing period.



Cattle were essentially fed indoors for almost six months. Despite this, we ended the winter with about 160 surplus round bales in the yard – I always like to have several months silage in reserve as cover for springs like this one

One such example is the farm of Margaret and Raymond Palmer near Castlefin, Co Donegal. They run a herd of 25 spring-calving suckler cows. The cows are mainly Limousin Simmental crosses, which are then crossed back to a terminal Charolais sire.

The bull calves are kept entire and

sold at 11-12 months weighing around 480-520kg for further feeding to a local finisher. Heifers are kept on for a second season and some additional heifers are purchased as yearlings to boost stocking rate on the farm.

Heifers are generally finished out of the shed at 23 months typically averaging 360kg carcass and grading U-3=. The farm is renowned for achieving excellent weight for age as the figures have just demonstrated.

The farm is paddocked and all stock are rotationally grazed. There is a strong emphasis on grass quality with surplus bales taken out throughout the season and first cut silage taken out just after mid-May each year.

"This has, without doubt, been a challenging spring for us," says Raymond. "Turnout which would normally be in March was delayed until April.

"Cattle were essentially fed indoors for almost six months. Despite this, we ended the winter with around 160 surplus round bales in the yard. Fortunately, we didn't have to source and pay for extra silage. I always like to have several month's silage in reserve to give myself cover for springs just like this one."

Interestingly, Raymond is not interested in trading bales. He also wouldn't like to see a neighbour or close contact



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The volume of silage in a pit can be readily measured.



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stuck: "If I let someone have bales in the winter or spring, the agreement is that they are replaced with ones of similar quality later in the year."

Grass on this well-stocked farm is currently tight with some of the second cut silage area pulled in for grazing. This will probably delay second cuts slightly but will help keep grass ahead of stock, which is important at this time of year.

### Winter 2024/25 feed situation

Local Teagasc drystock advisor Kevin McMenamin has already been out on the farm with Raymond to assess the current feed stocks for this winter and together they completed a winter fodder budget.

The projection (see Table 1 below) indicates that the Palmers will carry approximately 76 head of cattle through the winter. This breaks down as: 25 cows plus a stock bull; 15 one to two-year-old heifers for finishing, and 35 weanlings – a mixture of homebred and purchased animals.

Provision will be for a 150-day winter. Weanlings will average 1.5kg of meal from housing to turnout and finishing heifers will average 4kg/day over the feeding period. This means that the farm will need 16.3 tonnes of meal and almost 310t of fresh silage (20% DM) or almost 62t of silage dry matter.

### Feed reserves

Currently there are 200 round bales of silage in the yard and a pit which, when measured, contains approximately 397t of fresh silage or almost 80t DM.

"Between surplus grass and a small second cut we hope to make an additional 100 bales before the end of the season," says Raymond.

This will leave the farm with 300 round bales of silage at 30% DM which equates to 63t of silage DM or 210t of fresh silage.

In essence, at current stock numbers and over a five month winter the Palmer's farm has sufficient round bales to meet the demand for the coming winter. The pit silage will be held as a reserve.

Knowing your exact position in terms of feed at this stage of the year gives great peace of mind. Equally it highlights what needs to be done to build stocks for the remainder of the year on farms where there is a deficit. Either way, sitting down and working out a fodder budget is a very worthwhile exercise.

**Table 1:** Winter 2024/25 feed situation

Animal Type		No of Animals (a)	Winter feeding days (b)	Dry Matter Re-quired/ Head Day Kg (c)	Planned Meal Feed- ing Kg/ Head/ Day (d)	Meal required (tonnes fresh wt.)	Net Rough- age In- take per Day 9Kg DM) (e=c- d*0.86)	Total Rough- age required kg DM (f=a*b*x e)
Cows		25	150	9	0	0.0	9.0	33,750
Incalf Heifers						0.0	0.0	0
Weanlings		35	150	4.7	1.5	7.9	3.4	17,903
Cattle	1½ Males					0.0	0.0	0
	1½ Heifers	15	110	8.3	4	8.4	1.9	10,206
	Other	1	150		0	0.0		0
<b>Total</b>		<b>76</b>				<b>16.3</b>		<b>61,859</b>

## Taking action: If you are in a fodder deficit, you have a number of options

- If weather permits, you can close a sufficient second cut area or take out grazing surpluses to cover your winter demand.
- Sowing fodder crops can be an option later in the month or into August. Growing as much fodder as you can will obviously leave you less exposed to the market.
- You can consider stretching out fodder supplies with extra concentrate, which is fine, but it will put extra demand on cash flow.
- Consider a 'no passengers' strategy going into the winter whereby stock such as empty cows or problem cows will be identified early and targeted for sale before the housing or early in the winter to reduce feed demand. If cattle prices remain strong this may be an attractive option on some farms and it will provide some extra cash flow.
- Look at stock destined for finishing over the winter and identify

animals that, with some strategic meal feeding for six to eight weeks at grass, could be finished before housing.

- There is no doubt there will be more turns and twists in weather and grass growth over the next few months, so continually upgrading your fodder budget is a must.
- You may not be able to fully achieve it this winter but even in the south of the country you should be gearing up to have enough fodder to cover you for a five- to six-month winter. You may not need your reserve every year, but it is a worthwhile insurance policy.
- One huge learning from the last major fodder crisis was that well-made, carefully stored, pit silage has an extremely long 'shelf-life'. In extreme cases, silage made 20 years earlier was still palatable and nutritious. So well-made silage is not just worth having, it's money in the bank.



Raymond Palmer and Teagasc advisor Kevin McMenamin created a winter fodder budget.